

# DOCTOR IN KOREA

The Story of

OLIVER R. AVISON

M.B., LL.D., M.D.

by Nathaniel A. Benson from notes and documents  
supplied by Dr. Norman Found, M 19

DOWN IN THE warm Florida sunshine at St. Petersburg, a great and notable Canadian doctor has attained the 95th year of a life of distinguished achievement. Drowsing on toward the century-mark of a career of fruitful effort and selfless accomplishment, Dr. Oliver R. Avison is and should rightfully be today one of the most revered and cherished figures in the history of Canadian medicine.

To explain this we must go back almost a full century in Canada's history, to a time seven years before even Confederation when Oliver Avison was born in Yorkshire on June 30, 1860. While he was a very young lad, England's Industrial Revolution and its attendant miseries had caused his father to migrate to Canada in the late 'sixties to become superintendent of a cotton mill in the town of Almonte. At 16 young Oliver insisted on getting a mill job, but a year of doing menial jobs made him answer an emphatic "Yes" when his father asked him if he had had enough of manual labour. So back he went to Almonte High School, studied harder, obtained a teacher's certificate, and began teaching in Smith's Falls in 1878. He taught for 3 years and returned to Ottawa's Normal School to get a better pedagogic standing. In 1881 he registered in the Ontario College of Pharmacy, Toronto, whence he graduated in '84 at 24 years of age with the Gold Medal for Pharmacal Proficiency, and two additional Gold Medals for having distinguished himself in Chemistry and *Materia Medica*. He was at once appointed lecturer in Botany at O.C.P. in '85 he became Professor in *Materia Medica* and married Miss Jennie Barnes, daughter of the Reeve of Smith's Falls, whom he had met while teaching there. In '87 he graduated with Honours in Medicine from the University of Toronto, and in '89 became a demonstrator, an instructor in Microscopy, a member of the Faculty of Medicine, and a skilful physician with offices at Sherbourne and Carlton Streets, where he was an associate of Dr. Irving Cameron, later Professor of Surgery. It must have seemed that he was destined to play an important but restricted part on the narrow stage of Toronto's growing community. He and Mrs. Avison were solidly established, deep in the responsibility of raising the first three of their ten children, when suddenly an unpredictable surge of interest in a small primitive land on the other side of the globe changed his whole life.

Korea is a sort of Asiatic Poland, a small, vigorous, densely populated country forced by her geography to be the buffer-state between the gigantic millstones of



Statue in Severance Compound

three world powers; Japan, China and Russia. None of the three has ever stopped trying to annex the buffer.

Avison's name will always be identified with that of Korea, or "Chosun", "*The Land of the Morning Calm*" as the New England scholar Percival Lowell (brother of Harvard's President) called it in his book published far back in 1888. The country, which has in recent times loomed so tragically in the lives of all of us, was not always called "The Land of the Morning Calm". Within the memory of living men Korea was called the "Hermit Land", and its official class considered themselves better Confucians if they immediately lopped off the heads of any foreign explorers of their desolate coasts, where any landing of foreign devils was, by state law, expressly forbidden on pain of death. The King was a despot, and by no stretch of the imagination could he be called a benevolent one.

The Hermit Kingdom had kept her doors to the world closed until the early 'eighties, but in 1882 a more enlightened monarch signed a Treaty with the United States giving business men a foothold in certain treaty ports and allowing the beginning of educational, medical and evangelical work. Surrounded by three not too friendly neighbours, the Hermit Kingdom was looking for help and friendship. Indeed, no country seemed to be in more pressing need.

Meanwhile, in Toronto, Avison had helped to organize the Medical Students' Y.M.C.A. and later the Medical Students' Mission. This mission had sent out Dr. A. R. Hardie, son of an Ontario Parliamentary leader, to establish in Korea the beginnings of a tiny hospital. Hardie, whose life and action were guided by spiritual principles, had sent back glowing reports of unknown and needy people, and promised an ample share of glory and grace in doing the Lord's work among the heathen. It did not matter that among Korea's oligarchic gentry, Buddhism had been expelled for over five centuries by the more practical tenets of Confucianism and that the ethics and moral teachings of the great sage were found to be more palatable and gracious than the rigid demands of a faith which seemed to handicap its practitioners in the enjoyment of a number of the world's simpler pleasures.

Avison read the letters, for he was not only a friend of Hardie but a member of the Board of Management of the Mission. He decided to go himself. Masterful and



dynamic, he yearned for a larger and more spiritually-satisfying life. Tall, fair-haired, bearded and bright-eyed, brimming with enthusiasm and self-confidence, he had the gusto of a young Teddy Roosevelt—and the same flair for leadership. Once his mind was made up, no one ever dreamed of attempting to dissuade him. When his own Board was unable to send him, he applied to the Board of the Presbyterian Church of the United States, and was accepted. He joined the happy train of inspired Christian leaders, and, in 1893, at the age of 33, with a wife and three children, he sailed for the mysterious Land of the Morning Calm.

Since 1784 at least, there have always been Christians among the Korean people, and missionaries had visited the coasts as early as 1832. However, it was not until 1884, when Dr. and Mrs. R. S. Maclay arrived in Seoul from China, that the government officials, led by Baron Yun Chi Ho, chairman of Korea's Department of Finance, gave white missionaries a free hand to do whatever good they could among the unenlightened people of the kingdom. These, and their immediate successors, were not all medical missionaries, but what few there were had enjoyed the protection of royal patronage. Six months after one of them had been instrumental in saving the life of a Korean prince, the mission had been handed a small "Royal Korean Hospital". Situated in the heart of the picturesque capital Seoul, this had originally been the home of a young patriot named Hong Yung Sik. Inadequate, unadaptable and lacking in every kind of surgical and therapeutic equipment, it had nevertheless treated 265 in-patients in its first year under Dr. Hardie. Outside the capital, and widely scattered over the provinces were a few struggling missions where primitive arrangements had been made for the care of the sick. The kingdom had no medical school. The native "doctors" were of questionable competence. A suitable ointment for the cure of eczema was said to be derivable from "Disintegrated rock, licorice root, willow, orange-peel, bark of the mulberry tree, root of the pine tree, four spiders and five centipedes, all

ground into a powder and mixed with honey." This, when applied to acute or chronic cases, was all but infallible. In his practice, the Korean doctor must work in harmony with the guardian spirit of his patient. This spirit changed his residence daily from one part of the body to another, and any attempt to treat a part on the day in which he was residing in it was sure to anger him and to increase the trouble. Korean children who died from smallpox were wrapped in matting and hung up outside the city wall until the epidemic for that year had passed.

On arrival in Seoul Avison moved into a mud-walled, thatched-roof house and settled down to learn the language before taking over the superintendency of the hospital. But he was soon in harness. Cholera, in its deadliest epidemic form, struck in 1894. Primitive Korea, shackled by its Oriental fatalism still believed that what the gods sent upon man had to be borne uncomplainingly and that nothing need be done to change what had been decreed. Into the densely overpopulated South came Death the leveller sweeping his ghostly scythe, claiming many thousands before their time. But now the scourge was met head on by a force from across the sea, in Doctor Avison. Unlike the bulk of Korea's craven aristocracy, Avison stayed and fought the epidemic. He was summoned to the Home Department and given full power to go ahead. He was entrusted with funds; policemen were placed under his command. Thousands of pamphlets in the Korean language were distributed. A partially-occupied palace was turned over to Avison. Aided by a small band of trained or skilled assistants, he applied the principles of isolation, discipline, sanitation, sterilization of hospital equipment and extreme care of water handling. For seven weeks a dour battle was fought. As many as 300 a day died in the capital: the final toll was something in excess of 300,000. But many of those who, in other circumstances, would have died, were saved, and in the end the epidemic was stopped.

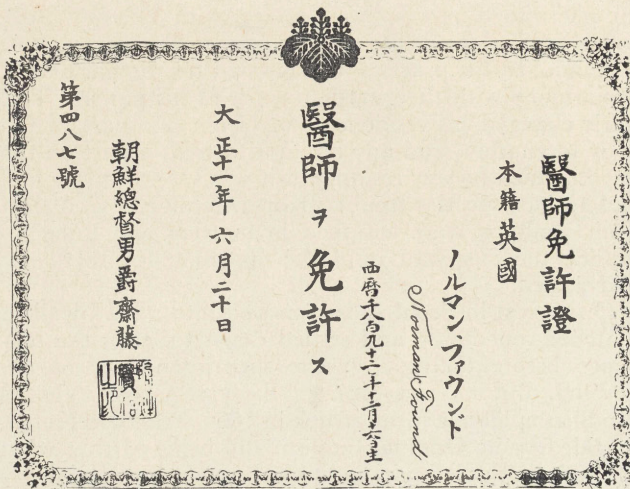
The terrors of cholera had scarcely passed away, leaving more food and perhaps a brighter life for the survivors in Seoul when Avison faced up to the difficult task of meeting the fatalistic beliefs of Confucianism with the practical demands of the situation. Fortunately the reigning monarch, Ye Wang, who, despite his divine

Seoul, 1893

Dr. Avison, Mrs. Avison







Certificate of permission to practise medicine in Korea

origin, had taken refuge in flight, was immensely impressed by the courage and resourcefulness of the champion of humankind from Toronto. The hospital and grounds were formally turned over to the Mission, and supported by a small government subsidy. Extensive repairs were made and soon the hospital was treating five hundred patients a month.

The atmosphere was not entirely conducive to success. In addition to a Chinese invasion in 1895, there were several palace revolutions which threw the whole nation into a turmoil. There were the insistent demands of the self-made emperor, whose personal physician Avison had become. Many a night when His Majesty was, after feasting, stricken with a species of stomach-ache, the doctor had to climb out of bed, draw on his striped trousers, don his cut-away coat and top hat and stride off in the chill Korean night to the imperial palace, there to sit up half the night administering to the internal strife that threatened the peace of Yi, of Korea and of the foreign treaty powers. After the murder of the queen in October, 1895, two members of the foreign community were invited to be on guard near the king from dawn to dusk. On more than one occasion, when a night attack was expected at the palace, Avison and one or two of his friends would go to be with the king all night. Outside the palace the Japanese advisors to the government, disturbed by the threat of Christian and democratic ideas and determined to dominate the country by force, exercised a baneful influence on Avison's plans.

Nevertheless, the medical crusade moved ahead. Late in 1895 the first foreign nurse and a woman doctor arrived. By 1899 there had been eight physicians at the hospital, 4000 patients had been treated in the wards, another 75,000 in the dispensary. Young Korean males had been trained and partially qualified despite the low level of general education, the language difficulty, the absence of text books and the necessity of coining new medical terms. The fact is that Avison was not only an able zealot, he was a popular one. The skill of a man who could stop a cholera epidemic impressed the population: his personality, his wife, his family and his home endeared him to them. Avison was *persona grata* in the social life of Seoul: his boys played with the royal princes, his wife was judged the most graceful skater at a royal party held on the frozen surface of the imperial artificial lake. Thus many valuable contacts were made with sources advantageous to the hospital among the rich Koreans. Meanwhile, however, the number of Protestant parent missions from which Avison drew the bulk of his income and support had increased to six. Avison had dealt adroitly with this sympathetic but six-sided encouragement, but it taxed his skill to

keep on good terms with all of it. Gradually his hopes for the future crystallized in a vision of a combination of all the eager, but often conflicting elements.

His chance came in 1900. In that year he went on leave to New York, and there, at an Ecumenical Conference of Missions, he read a paper on *Comity in Medical Missions* advocating the consolidation of all such missions serving in Korea. L. H. Severance, a rich steel-master from Cleveland was sitting in the balcony with Dr. L. E. Holden, President of the College of Worcester. After hearing Avison's address, Severance (whose name will always be associated in good works with those of Korea and Avison) said to Holden: "How would it be if I went down and gave that young man money for a hospital?"

This was the quiet beginning of Severance Hospital, long well known as one of the best mission hospitals in any land. Later Avison and Severance were to confess to one another that their new and wonderful project had been born in answer to prayer on the part of both of them. At first the Mission Board was unwilling to have a medical plan costing over \$5000, but later Severance's initial gift of \$10,000 was trebled to complete the purchase of the site and the equipment of the building. The splendid new Severance Hospital designed by H. B. Gordon of Toronto was opened in Seoul on September 23, 1904, with a silver key turned by Mrs. Avison.

The hospital was by now a fact, but the unity which Avison coveted was not achieved for several years. No doubt decision in New York was delayed by news of the decay of the Korean government, already tottering from corruption within and from the machinations of Japanese advisors. In 1908 the latter secured complete control. Medical laws, curricula for students, the type of drugs used and even the language requirements were radically altered. An attempt was made by the Japanese authorities to introduce civic hygiene, and Severance Hospital was able to demonstrate dramatically that surgical erysipelas, hitherto a great nuisance, could be wiped out by purifying the water supply. But in the same year, seven young men who had first been taken in as dressers and students, were ready for the hospital's first graduation. From time to time, the Severance family threw more and still more capital into the development of medical facilities while regular nursing and medical classes were graduated, schooled by the staff and from the text books which Avison had written. Reason and expediency prevailed. In 1913 seven doctors representing five missions were attached to the hospital. Four years later the "Severance Union Medical College and Nurses' Training School" received its charter. Korean doctors were appointed and hospital facilities were enlarged to a capacity of 250 beds. The two institutions prospered hand in hand. By 1924, the yearly enrolment at the Medical College was 55; in 1934 it was 107. By 1934, forty-seven thousand patients had been treated in the wards of "Severance", another 1,270,000 in the dispensary, and 28,000 in the out-patient department.

The years 1919-20 were tragic ones for Korea and difficult for Avison. The country had grown restless under Japanese viceroys, by whom guerilla warfare was ruthlessly suppressed. In 1919 there was open rebellion. Thirty-three leaders, many of them Christians, signed a



"Declaration of Independence" for which they were promptly jailed. Riots followed, accompanied by many individual atrocities: whole villages were wiped out, and the wounded poured into Severance Hospital which by now had a well-organized surgical department. Pictures of these victims were taken and spirited away to a safe place. But by this time Christianity was recognized as being on the side of Korean nationality and this greatly enhanced the popularity of Severance. Under pressure, the Japanese made a virtue of necessity and Severance was able to obtain from the Japanese viceroy the status of a regular Medical College. For the next fifteen years classes of physicians licensed to practise in Korea and of graduate nurses were released to help solve Korea's problems of health and disease. A census showed that by 1937, 469 physicians had begun their training under Avison, while 183 students were in training at that time under a Korean College President, who was more acceptable to the authorities than an occidental would have been.

Simultaneously the activities of Avison were greatly extended. Dr. Horace Underwood had spent nearly a decade in organizing an Arts College near Seoul and when he died in 1916, no outstanding leader was available to replace him. At the request of the Board and Faculty of Chosun College and with the consent of Severance, Avison was called to continue the development of Chosun Christian College which filled a great need in providing teachers, journalists, agronomists, business men and religious leaders. Although Avison had had little experience of this kind he was a conspicuous success and was able to deal with the increasing pressure from the Japanese government authorities who demanded that their language be used in more than half of teaching and that Japanese Christian teachers be added to the faculty.

Among the Korean graduates were many who were deeply moved by the efforts of Avison and his faculty to educate and to help the people. A fund was organized and finally the erection of a statue to Dr. Avison on the Hospital grounds was authorized and arranged. In 1923 an excellent bronze likeness of the founder was placed on a stone pedestal overlooking the joint institutions in the public square near by. Avison's own grandchildren called the statue their "Black Grandpa". But the Japanese were less sentimental and melted the bronze Avison down for bullets in 1943.

After the disorders of 1919-20 the Korean nation



Dr. Avison on retirement

settled down to an uneasy decade of progress and comparative prosperity under the relatively benevolent viceroy Admiral Saito. Dr. Avison was fully occupied with developing his liberal arts college and advancing the project of getting his medical college recognized in Japan itself. Up to 1926 all British residents of Japan including Canadians enjoyed advantages not permitted to citizens of the U.S.A. All this was changed when the Anglo-Japanese alliance was discontinued at the insistence of Canada. The policies of imperial Japan hardened and from that time on it was evident that all foreigners in positions of leadership must go. Thus while the two institutions were evolving into nationalistic strongholds, devolution into Korean hands had to be prepared. Since for reasons of economy post-graduate study had to be taken in Japan, most Korean leaders were strongly exposed to Japanese ideas and only a few visited the west.

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Severance  
Union  
Medical  
College





Dr. Avison had hoped to make his institutions co-educational. This idea was firmly ruled out by officials in Tokyo but after years of negotiation involving changes in finance, teaching methods and organization the prize was eventually won. However in the nursing school standards were lowered to those prevailing in Japan. This was one step short of the university status desired which, under Japanese rule, could only be granted by the Emperor himself. With great difficulty the clause on Christian teaching was retained and this in itself ruled out university status.

After 1926, it became virtually impossible for physicians from the West to qualify in Japan and the number of teachers from abroad began to go down. Thanks to Avison, Koreans were by this time obtaining the requisite training and by 1934 they were in charge of several departments. In that year Dr. K. Soh took over the presidency of the medical college. Soh was able to deal directly with the officials in Seoul and peaceful progress seemed assured in spite of ominous charges in nearby Manchuria which later developed into the full-scale invasion of China in which Koreans were supposed patriotically to participate.

With the transfer of the College to the administration of Dr. K. Soh the time for Avison's retirement had come. He had spent forty-one years in Korea. He had

been a leader in nearly everything with which he was connected. He had created a hospital and a medical college; he had presided over a liberal arts college; he had established ineradicable principles of public health and child welfare. He had become an indispensable factor in every phase of Korean life. When Sir Herbert Marler, Canada's first Minister to Japan, visited Seoul, the Hon. Yun Chi Ho spoke for the Koreans: "We welcome you . . . we have long had a Canadian Minister in Seoul: Dr. Avison has been here for forty years."

The same Yun Chi Ho gave the farewell address when Avison was leaving . . . "In bidding you farewell we are losing two personalities in one: a great public benefactor and a great personal friend. As our benefactor you are leaving behind monuments of which anybody may be proud. In the first place we have your bronze statute in the Severance compound. When you are gone and we can see you no more in the flesh we shall look at that statute with a degree of affection that none may realize at this moment. You leave us three great institutions, Severance Hospital, the Medical College and Chosun Christian College to perpetuate your memory to the end of time. Your greatest monument however will be the never-ending stream of graduates from the College and the patients who will be benefited by the healing administration of the Hospital."



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